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An SBDC Serving a Largely Rural Territory

North Central Kansas Small Business Development Center serves 11 counties with a population of about 125,000 people.

By Tiffany Black | Feb 22, 2011

North Central Kansas Small Business Development Center
606 Washington Street,
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Concordia, Kansas 66901

[NCK SBDC Website](#)

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Name of director: Linda Sutton

No. of employees: One

No. of clients: 114

Hours spent with clients: 533

Capital infusion: \$2.66 million in 2010

What's noteworthy: Helping farmers to diversify revenue streams, bringing female entrepreneurs together, and providing training, mentoring, and gap financing for business.

If you find yourself on the highways of North Central Kansas, you are bound to pass a silver Cadillac deVille somewhere on the stretch of road that connects Jewell County (population 3,000) to Saline (population 50,000.)

That car belongs to Linda Sutton, the director and sole employee of the [North Central Kansas Small Business Development Center](#). The center was set up in 2003 to serve the 11 counties of North Central Kansas that were too far—a three hour's drive—from the nearest SBDC housed at Wichita State University. In the seven years since then, Sutton's little car has logged "too many miles to count" as she crisscrosses the region providing business owners with one-on-one support.

As you would expect, Sutton's clients include many local farmers. Her work often centers on helping these businesses diversify their streams of revenue. Tourism turns out to be one of the fastest-growing opportunities; more families are heading to the region to go on trail rides and visit pumpkin patches.

To help farms offer these kinds of attractions, or related services such as catering or bed-and-breakfast accommodations, Sutton last year put together a course called "Agritourism: Your Next Cash Crop?" The course was designed to help farmers "put packages together so someone can spend an entire weekend and have different activities," Sutton says. It was also designed to recruit businesses to take part in the state's [Simply Kansas](#) program, an initiative that promotes food and agricultural products grown, raised, produced or processed in Kansas.

Loren Swenson, who runs a small fresh produce market called Prairie Produce, was one of Sutton's 18 students. After taking the class, he signed on to Simply Kansas. Swenson is now working to launch a website, [PrairieProduce.com](#), and is taking additional classes with Sutton. "Linda has done an excellent job," says Swenson. "She works hard and is very enthusiastic."

Sutton has also created a program called [Project Open](#) to provide education, mentoring, and especially gap financing for local businesses, particularly in larger Saline County. ("The area didn't have a revolving loan fund to help business or programs to help entrepreneurs," Sutton says.)

Participants must either attend a series of three seminars that NCK SBDC offers or go through Kauffman's Fastrac Program. Entrepreneurs who have completed the coursework are then eligible to apply for grants of up to \$5,000.

When she's not coaching farmers or helping businesses obtain working capital, Sutton devotes special attention to the area's women business owners. Early on, Sutton noticed that the male entrepreneurs in the area seemed to enjoy more and different networking opportunities than their female counterparts. "Men tend to talk about what's going on in their business," says Sutton. "Women focus on family and friends and weren't getting the experience of business networking."

In 2006, Sutton began to host a quarterly networking night for women entrepreneurs in the area. The sessions allowed local entrepreneurs to network and brainstorm, and share their stories about the daily challenges of running a business. Before each event, Sutton supplied attendees with a list of women-owned businesses in the area so they could shop or dine before or after a meeting, to support their fellow women-owned businesses.

Like many of her clients, Sutton does a lot with a little; hers is a classic one-person operation. Fortunately, her work hasn't gone unnoticed. For her efforts, she was named the SBA Women in Business Champion in 2007. And she was recognized again in 2009 when she was named the Kansas State Star and ASBDC Star Performer.

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